

Alliance of Inconvenience: Syria and Hizballah

Martin Kramer

Hegemony in Lebanon has been one of the most consistent policy aims of Syria under Hafiz al-Asad. In pursuit of that end, Syria has resorted to varied methods, and has enjoyed considerable success. Syria registered its most significant triumphs after 1982, when it foiled Israel's attempt to remake Lebanon and thwarted the effort by the United States to bolster the Lebanese central government. Since that time, Syria has worked assiduously to consolidate its hold over Lebanon, including the capital, Beirut.¹

But Syria has preferred to have others do its work in Lebanon whenever possible. Damascus has often operated through Lebanese surrogates, whose own parochial aims have coincided with Syrian interests. Precisely such a coincidence of interests has linked Syria to a predominantly Shi'ite grouping of fundamentalist Muslims known as Hizballah, the "Party of God". Since 1982, when Hizballah first appeared in Lebanon, Syria has worked with radical Lebanese Shi'ites to drive out all other foreign rivals from Lebanon.²

It is true that the ultimate aims of Syria and Hizballah cannot be reconciled: Syria strives to bring Lebanon into an Arab orbit around Damascus, while Hizballah seeks to remake Lebanon as an Islamic state oriented toward Teheran. Yet Syria

and Hizballah also appreciated from the outset that the United States and Israel opposed either resolution of Lebanon's crisis. The differences between Syria and Hizballah rapidly diminished before the prospect of a Lebanon dominated by Israel and the United States. Syria and Hizballah shared few principles, but they faced the same enemies, and they quickly found a basis for a practical collaboration that met with astonishing success. In a short time, the United States retreated completely from Lebanon, and Israel abandoned all ambition in a retreat to a minimal line of defense in the country's south. In a series of cautious steps, Syria has moved to consolidate its position in nearly every part of Lebanon.

But in a development which Syria could hardly have foreseen, Hizballah has emerged as a force in its own right, with claims to Lebanon that cannot be reconciled with Syria's. Hizballah, although Syria's inferior, has brashly sought to reap the most advantage from the retreat of their common enemies. As a result, Hizballah and Syria have come perilously close to confrontation, and are still poised on the brink of conflict. In one sense this is an uneven match, for Hizballah is a populist movement and militia, while Syria commands all the power of an armed state. When Syria and Hizballah have nearly come to blows, it has been Hizballah that has backed down. But Hizballah has demonstrated its resourcefulness in resisting other states through the techniques of guerrilla war and terror, and it enjoys the state

patronage of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Syria respects Hizballah's own proven methods of political intimidation.

This is a brief case study of an unequal alliance, of the compromises and resentments it creates. Syria under Hafiz al-Asad has often employed allies and surrogates, most notably in its manipulation of Lebanese factions and Palestinian groups. These relationships are often unacknowledged and even denied by those who enter into them, and they are difficult to track. The Syrians have preferred not to acknowledge that a relationship with Hizballah even exists, and have justified it only in the most oblique terms. In contrast, Hizballah is a populist movement which must constantly justify its strategy to a mass following. Its spokesmen have conducted a more public discussion of the costs and benefits of the alliance. For that reason, the analysis here will tend to emphasize the view of the alliance from within Hizballah. It is much more difficult to find evidence for how the relationship is viewed in the inner circles of the Syrian ruling elite. The imbalance in the analysis reflects disproportionate evidence. But where the Syrian attitude cannot be demonstrated by Syrian statements, it can sometimes be deduced from Syrian actions.

The first of those actions was the admission into Lebanon's Bekaa Valley of a group of Iranian volunteers in the first days following Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982. It was a

decision made quickly, in the midst of a war which required momentous Syrian decisions every day. As it turned out, the admission of those volunteers constituted the first essential step in the establishment of Hizballah.

SYRIA AND IRAN CONCEIVE HIZBALLAH

When Israel invaded Lebanon in June 1982, Syria and Iran were already allies. Their relationship had been forged in the furnace of another war, between Iran and Iraq. Syria, the adversary of Iraq in a struggle for Arab primacy, had thrown its weight behind Iran in the belief that Syria would profit most from any humbling of Iraq's Saddam Husayn. Iran in turn sought to outflank Iraq through an alliance with Syria, and keep Iraqi troops pinned down along Iraq's border with Syria, far from the actual theatre of war. Money, in the form of oil, greased the smooth operation of the alliance: Iran provided Syria with large quantities of oil on credit, at heavily discounted prices. Then as now, Syria faced a severe economic crisis, and Damascus welcomed the relief extended by Iran. At the same time, Syria cut off the oil pipeline carrying Iraqi oil to the Mediterranean, a measure of economic warfare of great value to Iran.³

Well before Israel's invasion, Islamic Iran had also played an active role in Lebanon. After Khomeini's seizure of power, delegations of Iranian religion figures became a frequent sight

in the Shi'ite-populated areas of Lebanon, and Lebanese Shi'ites visited Iran in growing numbers. The Iranian Embassy in Beirut conducted extensive activities in the Shi'ite southern suburbs of the city, organized demonstrations near the Embassy and at the Shiyah Husayniyya (the major Shi'ite mosque complex in the suburbs), and subsidized various Lebanese Shi'ite publications.⁴ But Iran did not yet seek to establish a separate framework for its supporters, and maintained close ties with existing organizations, such as the Supreme Islamic Shi'ite Council and the Amal movement (which opened an office in Teheran).

In 1982, Syria found itself under attack by Israel in Lebanon, and Iran sought to make a reciprocal show of solidarity with Syria in opposition to Zionist aggression. This it proposed to do by sending Iranian volunteers through Syria into Lebanon, where they would then battle Israeli forces. This idea was first mooted in 1979, immediately after the Iranian Revolution, when the new regime first established close ties with the Palestine Liberation Organization. The notion was identified closely with the activities of Muhammad Montazeri, son of the Ayatollah Husayn Ali Montazeri (who today is Khomeini's heir apparent). The younger Montazeri had spent some time in Lebanon with Palestinian groups prior to the Iranian Revolution, and with the Revolution's success he began to recruit volunteers for an expeditionary force of 1,000 Revolutionary Guards who would be sent to Lebanon, and whose ranks would eventually be expanded to 10,000.⁵ The

Lebanese government grew very apprehensive about the possible arrival of these volunteers, and even planned to close Beirut's airport should a flight of volunteers arrive. In the end, the younger Montazeri led a group of a few hundred Iranians to Damascus where they were kept cooling their heels. Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad then assured Lebanese President Elias Sarkis that the Iranian volunteers would not be permitted to cross into Lebanon. When Iraq invaded Iran a few months later, the Iranians departed for that other battlefield, which provided an inexhaustible outlet for the zeal of would-be martyrs. The younger Montazeri was later killed in a bombing in Teheran in July 1981.

The initiative of 1979 proved a false start. But a very different situation prevailed in 1982 following the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. By that time, the Gulf war front had stabilized and Iran could spare some Revolutionary Guards for a Lebanese adventure. The collapse of all central authority in Lebanon also meant that the Lebanese government's protests counted for naught in Damascus, and Syria was left to make its own calculation. Furthermore, Syria's ties with Iran had been strengthened, making it harder for Syria to resist Iran's overtures.

Still, Syrian authorities were less than enthusiastic about the possible influx of thousands of Iranians into a very

sensitive battle zone. The volunteers lacked the training and equipment necessary for doing battle with Israel, and the burden of transporting, feeding, and housing this ineffectual force was likely to fall upon Syria. And unless the Iranian volunteers could be controlled by Syria, they were liable to create unpredictable complications. On the other hand, Syria recognized that a small Iranian contingent might be harnessed to Syria's own purposes, particularly to the Syrian effort to mobilize Lebanon's indigenous Shi'ite population against Israel. At the same time, Syria sought to make its virtual occupation of the predominantly Shi'ite Bekaa Valley acceptable to the local population. The admission of Shi'ite co-religionists from Iran might make the Syrian presence seem somehow less onerous. And so while Syria declined to receive most of the Iranian volunteers, Damascus did allow a small Iranian contingent to establish bases in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, beginning in October 1982. Syria also permitted Iran to establish a logistical base in Syria at Zabadani, along the Lebanese border. And Syria allowed Iran to provide support to the volunteer contingent by an air bridge from Teheran to Damascus. Iran entrusted the operation to the Revolutionary Guards, and the smoothing out of details with Syrian authorities became the responsibility of the Iranian Ambassador to Damascus.

Almost immediately upon their arrival in the Bekaa Valley, the Iranians began the systematic recruitment of Lebanese Shi'ites to their flag. By a brilliant combination of

ideological indoctrination and material inducement, the Iranians soon had a substantial clientele among Lebanese Shi'ites, and this following took the name of Hizballah. Most of Hizballah's leaders were Shi'ite men of religion who professed fealty to the religious and spiritual authority of Imam Khomeini. The movement rapidly gained momentum, and soon spread to the other major areas of Shi'ite population, such as the southern suburbs of Beirut and the villages and towns of South Lebanon. Hizballah's message was direct, and had great appeal for that part of the Shi'ite community which had despaired of the Lebanese state. An Islamic state, claimed Hizballah, would rid Lebanon of foreign intruders, end confessional strife, establish a regime of social justice, and set the stage for the liberation of Jerusalem. Within a year of the Iranian arrival in Lebanon, Hizballah was a going concern, led by eloquent leaders who commanded an armed militia and a highly effective clandestine branch.

Hizballah emerged at the very time when Israel, the United States, and France sought to consolidate their positions in Lebanon by a policy of active intervention in Lebanese affairs. In the course of 1982, the Shi'ites of South Lebanon found themselves under an increasingly burdensome Israeli occupation, while the Shi'ites of Beirut's southern suburbs faced an intimidating array of foreign contingents in their own backyard. For both Hizballah and Syria, the foreign presence constituted a hostile occupation. It was essential that these powers be denied

any opportunity to remake Lebanon in accord with their own plans. So began the a cooperative relationship between Hizballah and Syria with the design of driving all foreign forces out of Lebanon.

The precise role played by Syria in promoting Hizballah's attacks on the Multinational Force in Beirut and Israeli forces in South Lebanon is ~~probably~~ known only by a few persons in Syria and Hizballah. But it is probable that the highly sophisticated suicide bombings, which in some instances involved vast quantities of explosives, were carried out by Hizballah with the acquiescence and possible collaboration of Syria. Syria's role in encouraging Hizballah's attacks against Israel was still more conspicuous. Syria's policy of support for Hizballah was authorized by Asad and coordinated by Ghazi Kan'an, the head of the Lebanon Branch of Syria's General Intelligence. Kan'an worked closely with the leading lights in Hizballah, including Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, Hizballah's spiritual guide; Husayn al-Musawi, the leader of the Hizballah-backed Islamic Amal group in Baalbek; and Shaykhs Abbas al-Musawi and Subhi al-Tufayli, Hizballah leaders in the Bekaa Valley.⁶ Iran's Ambassador to Damascus, Ali Akbar Mohtashemipour, played a major role in coordinating the practical details of Hizballah's cooperation with Syria.

Fadlallah later explained Hizballah's rationale for the

alliance with Syria. Syria opposed both Israel and the United States in Lebanon; "its role is positive in both cases and we benefit from it in Lebanon. If relations with Syria were negative, the Muslims would have been squeezed into the Israeli corner." Only Syria's active role against the United States and Israel guaranteed some freedom of action for the Lebanese.⁷ "We believe that any differences with Syria on details will not affect the agreement on principles governing our relations, because we are all interested in decisively confronting the Zionist occupation through operations carried out by the Islamic resistance."⁸

By the middle of 1984, Hizballah and Syria had achieved their principal aims, and the foreign forces were in full retreat. The American and French governments had been utterly demoralized by the suicide bombing attacks against their Multinational Force contingents, and they carried out the "redeployment" of their forces back to home. Israel could no longer bear the casualties inflicted by Shi'ite guerrillas, and withdrew to a narrow "security zone" in the ten kilometers of Lebanon just north of Israel's border.

THE QUARREL OVER SPOILS

The shared adversaries were on the run. But these retreats narrowed the basis for cooperation between Hizballah and Syria;

the tension in the relationship drew closer to the surface. In some instances violence broke out, as Hizballah and Syria each sought to take the lion's share of the spoils of victory. In the Bekaa Valley, the site of operational bases of Hizballah, clashes between Hizballah's militiamen and Syrian soldiers occurred with growing frequency beginning in 1984. Syrian forces were determined to control all movement in the region, resulting in numerous incidents at Syrian checkpoints along the major arteries in the Bekaa Valley and in Baalbek itself. The first open confrontation occurred in May 1984, in conjunction with a Syrian decision to reduce the number of Iranian Revolutionary Guards in the area. The Syrians decided at the same time to confiscate some of the weapons held by Hizballah, and to prevent the transfer of weapons from the Revolutionary Guards to Hizballah. This fired much resentment in Hizballah's ranks, and at a rally in Baalbek, demonstrators tore up pictures of Syrian President Asad and chanted anti-Syrian slogans. Still more serious clashes occurred in August and September 1984, involving the exchange of gunfire, casualties, and kidnappings in and near Baalbek.

Baalbek and the Bekaa Valley remained a point of conflict between Hizballah and Syria, especially after Hizballah became increasingly involved in the kidnapping of foreigners. Following the retreat of the Multinational Force from Beirut, Hizballah's animosity toward the West found new outlets in a campaign of kidnapping sometimes directed by Iran and sometimes undertaken

spontaneously by Hizballah. Initially, the Western governments held hostage by the elusive Islamic Jihad assumed that their kidnapped nationals were secreted in the Bekaa Valley, and began to pressure Syria to bring about their release. Although Syria denied any control over the doings of Hizballah, the hostage question soon became a matter of Syrian prestige, especially when Syria was accused of abetting terrorism. As Fadlallah himself admitted, "it is natural for Syria to be interested in the hostage question, especially since the imperialist world media are trying to hold it responsible." Syria has never shied from employing surrogate terrorism in the service of Syrian aims. But Hizballah's kidnappings in Lebanon, unlike Hizballah's guerrilla operations against foreign and Israeli forces, served no Syrian purpose, and only embarrassed Damascus by demonstrating Syria's inability to restore order in Lebanon.

Syria applied sustained if inadequate pressure on Hizballah to bring about the release of the hostages. The extreme secrecy practiced by Hizballah regarding both the whereabouts of the hostages and the personal identity of the kidnappers stemmed not so much from fear of American or French covert action as from a dread of Syria's various intelligence services. In dealing with Syria, Hizballah's leaders mastered the high art of dissimulation. They professed to know absolutely nothing about the kidnappings, and since the Syrians could not threaten them without provoking Iran, Hizballah's leaders could persist in

telling the Syrians obvious falsehoods without being called to account. The Syrians, for their part, were placed in the disagreeable (and unfamiliar) position of making excuses for their lack of forceful action. The issue of the hostages contributed to the general atmosphere of distrust between Hizballah and Syria which found expression in periodic clashes in the Bekaa Valley.

Syria likewise resented the embarrassing involvement of Hizballah in the hijacking of TWA Flight 847 in July 1985. It is not clear just what transpired in the complex war of nerves which pitted Hizballah and Iran against Amal and Syria. But Hizballah and Iran ultimately yielded to Syrian pressures for the release of the hijacked passengers. The application of that pressure created ill feelings in Hizballah, and in September 1985 Hafiz al-Asad received four leading figures in Hizballah in order to stress Syria's support for their armed struggle against Israel in south Lebanon. Hafiz al-Asad's message was clear: so long as Hizballah directed its energies against Israel, it would enjoy full Syrian support and cooperation. But if Hizballah conducted potentially embarrassing operations without prior consultation, Syria would not consider itself obligated to support Hizballah, and might even work against it.

The conflict in the Bekaa Valley between Syria and Hizballah in late 1985 and 1986 reflected the growing Syrian preoccupation

with the hostage issue, as Syria sought to dispel its image as a terrorist state. The tension was punctuated by outbursts of low-level violence. In December 1985, Hizballah leader Shaykh Subhi al-Tufayli failed to stop at a Syrian Army checkpoint, and he was fired upon (though not injured). In May 1986, recriminations reached new heights, and involved the Syrian imposition of a virtual siege on Baalbek accompanied by kidnappings and counter-kidnappings between Syrian troops and Hizballah members.

In Beirut, Hizballah came increasingly into conflict with Syria's other Shi'ite protégé, the Amal movement under Nabih Berri. Amal clearly represented Syria's preferred partner in the Shi'ite community, since its program rested on a reform of the confessional system, not its dismantlement as advocated by Hizballah. Amal's relationship with Syria was not free of tension either, and Amal leader Nabih Berri generally tried to preserve his independence vis-à-vis Damascus. But as Amal and the Palestinian organizations in Beirut came increasingly into conflict, Berri had no choice but to rely heavily upon Syria, and for a time he virtually transferred his base of operations to Damascus. Hizballah for its part regarded Amal as a Syrian instrument, especially after Syria engineered the short-lived Tripartite Accord between Berri, Druze leader Walid Junblatt, and leader of the Lebanese Forces Elie Hubayqa, in December 1985. Hizballah rejected the accord and lambasted Amal for dealing with the Lebanese Forces.

Amal and Hizballah disagreed not only over the future of Lebanon but over the nature of the struggle against Israel in South Lebanon. Amal favored implementation of U.N. Security Council Resolution 425, which called for Israel's total withdrawal behind a secure frontier. Hizballah rejected Resolution 425, since recognition of Israel's right to secure frontiers was tantamount to recognition of Israel. Political disagreements between Hizballah and Amal were exacerbated by exchanges of gunfire over turf, and Iran intervened on numerous occasions to negotiate truces between Hizballah and Amal.¹⁰ When Amal clashed with Hizballah, no one in Hizballah doubted where Syria's sympathies lay.

Nor could there be any doubt about Syria's view of the conflict between Hizballah and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), the pan-Syrian organization controlled in part by Damascus. This conflict was played out in many parts of Lebanon, but most dramatically in the battle for a village. In the region between Baalbek and South Lebanon lay the western portion of the Bekaa Valley and the strategically important village of Mashghara, controlled by the SSNP. If Hizballah were to control this village (and nearby Jezzin), Hizballah's supporters in South Lebanon would have a direct link with the movement's main operational bases in the Bekaa Valley, and with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards stationed there. In 1986, Hizballah sought

to establish a measure of geographic contiguity by entering Mashghara and dislodging the SSNP. In June 1986, the confrontation between Hizballah and the SSNP erupted in open violence in Mashghara, as the SSNP moved with Syrian backing to oust Hizballah from the town. Syria intervened to end the fighting, but Hizballah continued to clash with the SSNP elsewhere in Lebanon, as well as with Syrian-backed Lebanese Ba'thists and Communists.

What prevented these differences between Hizballah and Syria and Syria's clients from developing into a full-scale war? Iranian mediation kept a lid on the violence and assured that Hizballah's leaders did not lose sight of the larger objective of the strategic alliance with Syria. Sometimes the Iranian embassies in Damascus and Beirut intervened; sometimes special Iranian mediation missions were sent out to Syria and Lebanon; and sometimes Iran's Lebanese clients were summoned to Teheran. Iran's message to Hizballah was straightforward. The alliance with Syria was essential to the success of the overall Islamic strategy. Syrian cooperation aided the war effort against Iraq, and Syria had a role to play in the liberation of Jerusalem. Syria's Arab nationalist, Ba'thist creed was indeed abhorrent to all believing Muslims, and did not differ in kind from the ideology propagated by the criminal regime in Iraq. But so long as Islamic Iran remained a unique phenomenon, Lebanon's Islamic movement would have to choose allies who shared its interests

rather than its ideas. This was a matter of discipline and patience. In any event, no purpose could be served at this point in time by confronting Syria, since Syria enjoyed a preponderance of power in Lebanon.

This rationale figured in the public statements of Hizballah's leaders, who affirmed the value of the strategic alliance with Syria whenever necessary. Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, the spiritual mentor of Hizballah, put it succinctly: "We approve of the policy of confrontation being followed by the Syrians with regard to Israel. We also support their position vis-à-vis the United States. Syria plays a positive role which benefits us. At the present time, it protects Lebanese Muslims and spares them forced cooperation with Israel."¹¹ But by this formulation, Fadlallah made it more or less plain that Syria was simply the lesser of two evils. As Fadlallah put it on another occasion, "we must believe that Syria can play a major and effective role on the Lebanese issue, because the only alternative to Syria is Israel."¹² This hardly constituted a ringing endorsement of Syria, but its logic was irrefutable.

ON THE BRINK: THE BASTA MASSACRE AND AFTERMATH

No claim to hegemony in Lebanon can ever gain acceptance without control of Beirut. Israel reached this conclusion in 1982, and the Israeli invasion reached its high water mark with

the occupation of West Beirut and the expulsion of Palestinian and other armed organizations which were based there. But after Israel's departure, many of these same organizations attempted to return to West Beirut, and their fighting soon made life insufferable in the heart of the capital. The cradle of Hizballah had been the Bekaa Valley, where the movement had grown under Syrian protection. But two developments combined to transform Beirut into the capital of the movement. First, the move to Beirut made Hizballah far less dependent on Syria good will. Second, the vacuum left behind by Israel and the MNF offered Hizballah a sterling opportunity to gain a foothold in the most heavily populated Shi'ite area of Lebanon. Hizballah's principal centers were in the predominantly Shi'ite southern suburbs of the city, but the movement also extended its activities into the Basta quarter in West Beirut. There Hizballah maintained a base and command center in the Fathallah barracks.

Syria had tried to negotiate a security plan for West Beirut on a number of occasions, summoning the leaders of warring factions to Damascus for consultations. Several accords were reached, but they invariably broke down under the weight of the deep-seated animosities which pervade the city. Syria had avoided massive involvement in West Beirut for a long time, in the hope that it could achieve its aims without the considerable risk involved in sending Syrian commandos into the streets of the

Lebanese capital. In mid-1986 Syria introduced a few hundred lightly-armed forces into West Beirut in a tentative move to establish order. But by late 1986, it had become clear that Syria's interests throughout Lebanon would suffer if it did not act forcefully to end the fighting in West Beirut. In particular, the difficulties faced by Syria's protégé, Amal, in its battle with pro-Arafat Palestinian factions, threatened to deal Syria a defeat on its very doorstep.

Hizballah realized from the outset that the aim of Syria in West Beirut was the defense of its own interests rather than any altruistic desire to end bloodshed between Arabs. "The Syrian intervention," Fadlallah would later declare, "was not prompted by the fighting in West Beirut, but by the fact that Syria's entire role in Lebanon was threatened."¹⁹ That expansion of the Syrian presence in West Beirut brought Syrian forces dangerously close to Hizballah's bases there. It had long been the position of Hizballah that while Syria might have a role to play in West Beirut, those areas held by Hizballah²⁰ were entitled to an exclusion from Syrian control. Husayn al-Musawi noted the possibility that the various security plans were intended to constrict Hizballah's action, and he spoke of "the emotions of a group of young people," apparently in Hizballah, who opposed a greater security role for Syria. But Musawi admitted that Hizballah could not put a halt to the bloodshed in the city, and so he supported a limited plan which would restore order, while

opposing "any kind of political solution which would be based on a cessation of our struggle against the Zionist regime" -- an apparent rejection of any Syrian attempt to disarm Hizballah in West Beirut.¹⁴ Fadlallah took the same position: "If our fighters are authorized to continue their struggle, we have no objection," he commented on an expanded Syrian role in West Beirut. "But if it is a matter of tightening the vise around the Islamic currents, then we reject it."¹⁵

In early February 1987 a serious incident occurred between Hizballah and a Syrian patrol which ventured too close to Hizballah's enclave in West Beirut. In the ensuing clash, Hizballah's fighters forced the patrol to beat a humiliating retreat. In doing so, they also captured several Syrian soldiers, whom they stripped, tied up, and dumped in a city refuse bin. Fadlallah tried to calm the situation, explaining that Hizballah was on a high state of alert in anticipation of American aggression, and that the Syrian patrol had acted in a provocative way, opening fire first and killing a Hizballah member. The incident "quickly generated emotional reactions," but Fadlallah maintained that the clash did not reflect a "deep-rooted" conflict.¹⁶ But Syria's crack forces had been humiliated, and the offense to their pride was not to be forgotten.

For on February 24, 1987, Syrian forces and Hizballah

clashed as never before, after 7,000 Syrian troops entered West Beirut in force and issued an ultimatum to all of the various armed factions to evacuate their headquarters. According to Ghazi Kan'an, Hizballah asked for and received more time to evacuate its Fathallah barracks in West Beirut. Hizballah subsequently notified Syria that the barracks were evacuated, but when Syrian troops arrived at the scene, "shots were fired at them. We subsequently discovered that, while our men were being deployed, armed elements remained on the spot and fired at them. Our forces had to respond."¹⁷ In the resulting exchange of fire, 23 members of Hizballah were killed.

Hizballah's account differed in every respect. According to Hizballah's statement, its members had actually evacuated the Fathallah barracks in compliance with the Syrian order, but the Syrians then had entered an adjacent building where Hizballah members had taken refuge. After arresting some thirty members in a first-floor apartment, the Syrians shot them in cold blood. When the massacre was over, the Syrians loaded the bodies into a military truck, covered them with vegetables, and delivered them to a Beirut hospital.¹⁸ Fadlallah insisted that "not one shot was fired at the Syrians. It was a cold-blooded massacre," committed "in an apartment outside the barracks, not in the headquarters that had been handed over to the Syrian forces without any problem."¹⁹

The Basta massacre had a tremendous impact upon the southern suburbs of Beirut. Some 50,000 persons attended the funeral of the victims, and there was a widespread refusal in Hizballah to accept the official Syrian account. Two days after the killings, the leading figures in Hizballah assembled in the Shiyah Husayniyya to review the events. Among the participants were Fadlallah, Sayyid Ibrahim al-Amin, Shaykh Subhi al-Tufayli and Shaykh Abbas al-Musawi, all leaders from the first rank of Hizballah. At the end of their deliberations, they issued a statement declaring that what had occurred in Basta was not a "security incident," as the Syrians would have it, but an unjustifiable massacre. The perpetrators had to be punished. The statement fell short of accusing Syria of premeditated murder, but indicated that such actions "do not serve the movement of resistance to Israel."²⁰ A number of individuals made still more impassioned statements in the immediate aftermath of the killings. Shaykh Hasan Nasrallah called the event "the Karbala of the twentieth century," evoking the slaying at Karbala in the seventh century of the Imam Husayn and his following, the greatest tragedy in Shi'ite religious history. Shaykh Subhi al-Tufayli claimed that the massacre was carried out on the orders of U.S. Secretary of State George Schultz. An unnamed representative of Hizballah, who visited Iran to participate in memorial services there for the Basta "martyrs", told the Iranian press that such "incidents" had been created by Syria "to create fear and to break the fighting spirit" of Hizballah.²¹ Fadlallah

announced that Syrian troops, despite the official claims of Damascus, had entered West Beirut only "under the guise of humane considerations."²² Anti-Syrian sentiment in the southern suburbs reached a peak.

The Iranians also understood the massacre as a serious sign of deterioration in the alliance with Syria. Iranian Prime Minister Husayn Musavi declared that any attack on Hizballah served the cause of imperialism. Ayatollah Montazeri expressed his condolences to Hizballah over the "great crime" committed against it, adding that "the weakening of the Lebanese Hizballah is, in fact, tantamount to providing security for Israel, rather than for Lebanon." Deputies of the Iranian Majlis announced that the security plan did not "put out the flames of dispute" in Lebanon, but instead delivered "a blow to the Islamic revolution of Lebanon." And Majlis Speaker Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani called the killings a "conspiracy".

Paradoxically, however, the entry of Syrian troops into West Beirut and the virtual Syrian siege of the southern suburbs had a sobering effect upon the leaders of Hizballah. The recollection of two events must have been ever-present in their minds. They could not have forgotten the Syrian regime's siege of the provincial Syrian city of Hamah in 1982. In that episode, Hafiz al-Asad unleashed all the force at his disposal in order to crush the rebellious Muslim Brotherhood. Thousands died in the

indiscriminate shelling of the city by artillery units of the regime's "Special Forces", and the ruthless resolve of the regime was established beyond any question. Nor could the leaders of Hizballah forget the Syrian shelling of Tripoli in northern Lebanon in September 1985, when Syria again sought to break a Muslim fundamentalist movement opposed to Syrian aims. The Tripoli movement, although Sunni, enjoyed the support of Hizballah and the patronage of Iran, which sought to mediate an end to the Syrian assault.²³ In the end, Iran's backing did little for the embattled fundamentalists of Tripoli, and in October 1985 they turned over their heavy and medium weapons to Syrian troops, surrendering their independent Muslim fundamentalist principality. When Syria encountered further Sunni trouble in Tripoli in July 1986, Syrian "Special Forces" acted ruthlessly, prompting an investigation by Amnesty International of an alleged massacre. For the leaders of Hizballah, Tripoli taught the important lesson that Iran did not have the capacity to restrain Syria in Lebanon. If the Syrian army entered the southern suburbs and met with the head-on resistance of Hizballah, Syria could be counted upon to use the most ruthless means at its disposal, and Iran would be unable to protect Hizballah.

It was therefore not surprising that most of the leaders of Hizballah urged restraint upon their followers. Fadlallah, while taking a firm position that the incident was indeed a massacre,

called not for revenge but for the trial of those Syrian troops who had committed the crime. In taking this position, Fadlallah found a safety valve for the release of the tension by implying that the action was the work of undisciplined soldiers, rather than a Syrian plan -- even though the Syrians themselves had not disavowed the actions of the Syrian soldiers. The Iranian press also began to attribute the massacre to "rebellious Syrian soldiers" and to demand their trial. Iran also sent an emissary to Damascus in the person of Minister of the Interior Ali Akbar Mohtashemipour, former Iranian Ambassador to Syria and one of the chief architects of the Syrian-Iranian alliance. And a month after the clash, Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad met for three hours with Hizballah's own principal leaders: Shaykhs Subhi al-Tufayli and Ibrahim al-Amin, Islamic Amal leader Husayn al-Musawi, and Hizballah security official al-Hajj Husayn Khalil. According to Musawi, Hizballah's "Syrian brothers" declared the Basta massacre "an isolated incident resulting from an erroneous reaction. Despite its seriousness -- it claimed the lives of 23 innocent brethren -- we seek normal relations with our Syrian brothers because the common threat we face helps us withstand the pain of our wound."²⁴ The Syrians, in a reversal, had discreetly admitted error, and Hizballah stopped insinuating that the massacre was a premeditated Syrian act. The breakdown of the alliance had been averted. In March Fadlallah declared that "the incident is closed."²⁵

At the same time, however, Hizballah's leaders made it clear to Syria that Hizballah regarded the southern suburbs as off limits to Syrian forces, and that the perimeter of the suburbs represented a red line. In the street, the warnings against Syria were formulated in tough terms. Pamphlets circulated in the southern suburbs warned Syria's "infidel Ba'thists" -- a highly derogatory term in Hizballah's lexicon -- to stay clear of the suburbs. Fadlallah's threats were much more oblique: the entry of Syrian troops into the southern suburbs was "not realistic because of complexities which we feel the Syrian leadership is aware of." Such an entry "would cause problems Syria does not want to face." Any attempt to disarm Hizballah in Beirut would be tantamount to a move against the very cause which united Hizballah and Syria, because the suburbs were "the arms cache for the Muslim revolutionaries' armed actions against Israel" and "the reservoir of the liberation."²⁶ In other words, a Syrian entry into the southern suburbs would demolish the basis of the alliance between Hizballah and Syria, and possibly prompt open warfare between the two. Fadlallah dismissed the possibility that Hizballah yield to Syria without a fight and remove its struggle to South Lebanon: "With the weapons at its disposal, Israel can lay siege to the fighters in a certain part of the South and can lay siege to their armories, and no one can prevent it from doing so." But Israel could not reach into the southern suburbs of Beirut; hence the logical necessity of Hizballah's continued armed presence in the suburbs.²⁷

According to Husayn al-Musawi, Asad understood the message: "President Asad assured us that Syria has not decided whether or not to enter the southern suburb, and that there is no justification for such an entry. The Syrians entered West Beirut because of the current fighting. But since there is no fighting in the suburb, it should not be disarmed while the Phalange militia are still armed."²⁸ Fadhallah also announced that "I can essentially affirm that the southern suburb is not part of any plan at present. When a broad plan for the mountain area, East Beirut, Sidon and its environs takes shape, then one can speak about the southern suburb."²⁹ But any careful reading of these statements revealed that Asad had not ruled out some future disarming of Hizballah in the southern suburb, but had made it contingent on an extension of Syria's "security plan" to the northern parts of the city. It was clearly Hizballah's hope that such a plan would prove to be beyond Syria's capacity, so that the Islamic movement might be left undisturbed in its fortified southern suburb.

THE BRINK AGAIN: THE GLASS KIDNAPPING

On June 17, 1987, Hizballah kidnapped the American journalist Charles Glass but a short distance from a Syrian checkpoint in Beirut. Glass was the first foreigner taken hostage after the massive Syrian entry into West Beirut, and his

kidnapping represented a direct challenge to the prestige of Syria as guarantor of the public safety in areas under Syrian occupation. The motives of Hizballah and Iran in authorizing the kidnapping of Glass remain obscure. But the Syrian reaction was swift and without precedent. The Iranian Revolutionary Guards, who had grown so accustomed to easy passage on their own roads between their Syrian base in Zabadani and their forward bases in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, were now denied entry to Lebanon. Nor could the Revolutionary Guards take for granted the continued use of the base at Zabadani, or the unimpeded transfer of needed materiel from Iran via the airport in Damascus. Ghazi Kan'an also visited Fadlallah to assure the spiritual mentor of Hizballah that it would be an error for Hizballah to test Syria's resolve over the kidnappings.

Fadlallah naturally tried to disclaim all responsibility in Glass's kidnapping on behalf of Hizballah, and tried to minimize its effects. He was at pains to reaffirm the importance of the relationship with Syria: "We take a strategic view of relations with Syria," he reiterated, admitting that "naturally, differences do occur, but we believe these matters can be brought under control in a mature and conscientious manner."³⁰ But the pressure which Syria brought to bear on Hizballah was the cause of much soul-searching in the ranks of the movement. In particular, Fadlallah and certain other clerics in Hizballah, who had never been consulted about the policy of kidnapping anyway,

intensified their moral criticisms of kidnapping in general and the kidnapping of Glass in particular. They were quickly answered by supporters of the kidnappers, who claimed that any foreigner still remaining in Lebanon, including Glass, was probably a spy, and that the kidnappings were acts of self-defense. (This view found two particularly vocal champions in Hizballah, Sayyid Ibrahim al-Amin and Shaykh Hasan Nasrallah). Fadlallah responded that regardless of whether Glass was a spy, and regardless of whether the Islamic movement was legitimately entitled to kidnap innocents, the kidnappings intensified Syrian pressure on Hizballah. Morality aside, the kidnappings made life in Hizballah dangerous, and might culminate in a violent confrontation with Syria.

The crisis found a fortunate resolution on August 17, when Glass escaped from his captors. According to Glass, he was not allowed to escape at all, but actually initiated his own deliverance. Still, there was enough ambiguity in the facts surrounding the escape so that Iran could claim credit before the Syrians, and Syria could claim credit before the Americans. With Glass's release, Hizballah and Syria surmounted yet another crisis in their relationship -- the most serious to date. Hizballah's clerics and Iran's representatives in Damascus and Beirut moved to improve relations with Syria, in a bid to offset Syria's own progress toward improved relations with the West. For the crisis had reminded Iran and its Lebanese clients of the

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fundamental asymmetry of the alliance with Syria. The simple fact was that Iran and Hizballah depended upon its benefits far more than Syria.

AN ENDANGERED ALLIANCE

Is the respite which has followed Glass's escape a temporary one? On the one hand, Syria and Hizballah continue to share many common interests. So long as Israel maintains even a residual presence in Lebanon, in the form of a narrow security zone, the work of the alliance cannot be regarded as complete. And the very fact that Syria and Hizballah respect one another's ruthlessness has also made them wary of provoking a head-on confrontation.

But should the dénouement occur in the near future, it will come as no surprise. Although a confrontation has not yet occurred, both sides are intellectually prepared to justify a battle should it come. There may even be a few persons in Syria and Hizballah who would welcome a crisis, believing that the alliance has outlived its usefulness and is injurious to their interests. Syria's renewal of ties with the United States has served notice to Teheran that Syria intends for now to keep its name clean, and expects Iran and Hizballah to do their part by submitting to Syrian discipline in Lebanon. Hizballah has warned Syria not to be seduced by the United States: "It is not in the

Syrian interest to lose us in order to gain the United States," says Husayn al-Musawi, "because Syria will not gain the United States. Hizballah is the only one fighting Israel today, and Syria knows it."³¹ But Syria continues to move toward improved relations with Satanic Washington. More significant, Hafiz al-Asad continues to play with the idea of an alliance reversal based on a rapprochement with Iraq. In that instance, Hizballah would face a serious situation, as Syria could isolate the movement from its Iranian backers. Hizballah therefore has begun to consider ways of reducing its dependence on Syrian good will. Iran has already explored avenues of influence in Lebanon which circumvent Syria. Revolutionary Guards have established themselves outside the Bekaa Valley in the southern Lebanese port city of Tyre, where the Syrians dare not tread (but where Amal is strong, and where Israel can retaliate without complications). And in a series of unusual moves, Hizballah has sought out new allies in Lebanon itself, such as Druze leader Walid Junblatt. In the past, Hizballah had no need for Lebanese allies, but the prospect of isolation has changed that.

Hizballah may be prepared to submit to Syria demands in the short term. But Hizballah has no obligation to Syria in the longer term, since Hizballah assumes that the Syrian presence in Lebanon will simply wither away as the Islamic movement grows stronger. Once asked about the possibility of future union between Lebanon and Syria, Fadlallah evasively declared that ties

between the two countries "should be distinctive and realistic",³² a euphemistic dismissal of any union. Future attempts by Damascus to expand the Syrian hold on Beirut and Lebanon may eventually make of Hizballah a champion of Lebanese independence, in spite of itself.

Just as Hizballah has yet to think through the implications of Syrian ambition, Syria has yet to admit that its own support for Hizballah has undermined Syria's long-term prospects for hegemony in Lebanon. It is sometimes said that Israel, by its 1982 invasion, inadvertently unleashed the dormant forces of Shi'ite radicalism in Lebanon. There is some truth to the observation. But without the encouragement of Syria, Hizballah could not have struck roots as quickly and deeply as it did. The irony is that Syria now faces a threat of its own making, in the form of a radical Shi'ism over which Syria has already lost control. Indeed, it may well be that Syria, despite its much-vaunted understanding of Lebanon's ways, has blundered more seriously than all other outsiders who have meddled in that troubled country. For Syria may wind up fighting the all-out war against Hizballah that everyone else has avoided.

1. Syria's role in Lebanon is discussed by Adeed Dawisha, Syria and the Lebanese Crisis (New York, 1980); Naomi Joy Weinberger, Syrian Intervention in Lebanon (New York, 1986); Itamar Rabinovich, "The Changing Prism: Syrian Policy in Lebanon as a Mirror, an Issue and an Instrument," in Moshe Ma'oz and Avner Yaniv (eds.) Syria Under Assad: Domestic Constraints and Regional Risks (New York and London, 1986), pp. 179-90; Elizabeth Picard, "La politique de la Syrie au Liban," Maghreb-Mashreq, no. 116 (April-May-June 1987), pp. 5-34; and Daniel Pipes, "Damascus and the Claim to Lebanon," Orbis, vol. 30, no. 4 (Winter 1987), pp. 663-81.

2. On Hizballah, see Martin Kramer, The Moral Logic of Hizballah, Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Occasional Paper no. 101 (Tel Aviv, August 1987); and Marius Deeb, Militant Islamic Movements in Lebanon: Origins, Social Basis, and Ideology, Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, Occasional Papers Series (Washington, November 1986), pp. 12-19.

3. For a discussion of the genesis and purposes of this alliance, see Yair Hirschfeld, "The Odd Couple: Ba'athist Syria and Khomeini's Iran," in Moshe Ma'oz and Avner Yaniv (eds.), Syria Under Assad: Domestic Constraints and Regional Risks (New York and London, 1986), pp. 105-24. It is sometimes thought that there exists a special affinity between Iran's Shi'ites and Syria's Alawite ruling élite, who claim to be Shi'ite as well.

But this claim has never been recognized by Iran's leading clerics. See Martin Kramer, "Syria's Alawis and Shi'ism," in Martin Kramer (ed.), Shi'ism, Resistance, and Revolution (Boulder and London, 1987), pp. 237-54.

4. A window on these early activities is the Shi'ite journal al-Muntalag, organ of the Iranian-backed Muslim Lebanese Students' Union. It is the best source on radical Shi'ite activities prior to the appearance of Hizballah's own newspaper al-Ahd in 1984.

5. Tishrin (Damascus), 17 December 1979.

6. A brief discussion of these figures is given by Kramer, The Moral Logic of Hizballah, pp. 6-9. For a short biography of Fadlallah, see Martin Kramer, "Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah," Orient: German Journal for Politics and Economics of the Middle East, vol. 26, no. 2 (June 1985), pp. 147-49.

7. Interview with Fadlallah, al-Hawadith (London), 24 May 1985.

8. Interview with Fadlallah, al-Ittihad al-usbu'i (Abu Dhabi), 2 July 1987.

9. Interview with Fadlallah, al-Nahar al-arabi wal-duwali (Beirut), 9-15 February 1987.

10. For an account and listing of Hizballah-Amal clashes, see al-Mujtama (Kuwait), 28 October 1986.

11. Interview with Fadlallah, Politique internationale (Paris), Autumn 1985.
12. Interview with Fadlallah, al-Nahar al-arabi wal-duwali, 9-15 February 1987.
13. Interview with Fadlallah, Le Quotidien de Paris, 9 March 1987.
14. Interview with Husayn al-Musawi, Kayhan (Teheran), 29 July 1986.
15. Interview with Fadlallah, Le Quotidien de Paris, 9 March 1987.
16. Interview with Fadlallah, al-Nahar al-arabi wal-duwali, 9-15 February 1987.
17. Interview with Kan'an, Le Quotidien de Paris, 6 March 1987.
18. Report by the Beirut bureau of the Agence France Presse, 25 February 1987.
19. Interview with Fadlallah, Libération (Paris), 13 March 1987.
20. Account in al-Nahar (Beirut), 27 February 1987. Here it was also reported that Hizballah made a video film about the clash, which included an interview with a survivor.
21. Interview in Kayhan, 9 March 1987.
22. Interview with Fadlallah, Kayhan, 10 May 1987.

23. For full accounts of Hizballah's view of the Tripoli situation, see interview with Subhi al-Tufayli, al-Nahar al-arabi wal-duwali, 14-20 October; interview with Husayn al-Musawi, al-Nahar al-arabi wal-duwali, 28 October -- 3 November 1985.
24. Interview with Husayn al-Musawi, al-Majalla (London), 8-14 April 1987.
25. Interview with Fadlallah, al-Hawadith, 27 March 1987.
26. Interviews with Fadlallah, Kayhan, 10 May; Le Quotidien de Paris, 9 March 1987.
27. Interview with Fadlallah, al-Hawadith, 27 March 1987.
28. Interview with Musawi, al-Majalla (London), 8-14 April 1987.
29. Interview with Fadlallah, al-Khalij (Sharjah), 2 April 1987.
30. Interview with Fadlallah, Islamic Republic News Agency, 11 July 1987.
31. Interview with Husayn al-Musawi, al-Ahd (Beirut), 30 August 1987.
32. Interview with Fadlallah, al-Nahar al-arabi wal-duwali, 1-7 July 1985.